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BOOKS ISSUE spring

its audience with its self-conscious charm), he keeps tripping over his infatuation with the blithe absurdities of his own youth. Beatdom's fools and frauds are made out to be God's fools — sainted frauds basking in romantic poverty, sexy pretentiousness. "Siobhan McKenna Group-Grope" is typical, detailing the weekly erotic meetings of seven "sex-hungry poets" who entangle and orgasm to recordings of the actress reading Yeats and the high-toned like. A smug orgy: that's Sanders' conception of rebellion.

Free love and civil disobedience are treated as aspects of the same sweet, ultimately pedantic spirit — anarchism as a way-out lifestyle. Social rebels battle the invisible empire of the right-wing FBI death-cult Establishment, each toke and grope a sign of grace. *Tales of Beatnik Glory* is an ode to underground cant, ironic rather than militant, but similarly lacking in any perspective on the utter innocuousness of its protagonists. Far from revolting against boredom, the hiply disaffected make boredom an art form.

Richard Meltzer's 1972 *Gaitcher* is a good antidote to the prostrate excesses of hip reverence. Yesterday's and today's: eyeball pages 44-48. "A Fatal Jerkoff on the Moon," where a party for Robert Mapplethorpe is in progress ("Robert's art stuff was good too, real good in fact and one of the things had a long bent male mutton dagger with the balls hanging over a sharp edge. Geez that must hurt!"), but Todd Rundgren is also there to inspire a whole chain reaction of lycanthropic fan-mag musings ("Other than music and living he's got hobbies too, foremost of which is reupholstering sofas in original designs"). Between Todd epiphanies the author spirals off into the class problems posed by Kuck's Market in Long Island or the unspeakable vengeance visited by the cult of Bobby Vinton upon the unbeliever Perry Como.

Gaitcher approaches pop without tears, whether attempting a phenomenology of tampons or confronting head-on the specter of "Neil Sedaka: Horseman of the Apocalypse." Meltzer's earlier *The Aesthetics of Rock* reversed the usual manner of validating the music: instead of trying to enshrine it in the sacred Western canon, he made the tradition of Kant and Schopenhauer meet "Surfin' Bird" on the Trashmen's own epistemological terms. But the before-the-fact revisionism of *Gaitcher* desanctifies the entire cultural landscape, from the groovy axis of rock/sex/dope on into the populist temples of TV, booze and sports, gutting categories, dissolving standards. So much for critical objectivity, and subjectivity too — meanings and structures serve as the rotten fruit floating in Meltzer's refreshing entropical punch. Picture Derrida translated by Lenny Bruce, or the Doors' blank-check shamanism restated in the blissful argot of big-time bowling. Language is impaled on the point of its own indeterminacy, but for the big picture, "Wiping for Pleasure" must stand as the first and last word. Art, love and pro wrestling's golden quarter-century offer their fleeting consolations, *Gaitcher* tells us, but grade-A toilet paper, now there's something important.

Further adventures in jive can be had in Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography, *Really the Blues* (written with Bernard Wolfe). Originally published in 1946, it's the odyssey of a Jewish musician who ends up a citizen in Harlem, drawn not to exploit or assimilate black culture, but to be assimilated by it. Mezzrow's passport into the ghetto isn't music but marijuana — he became a legendary dealer in the '30s. ("Mezz" became the byword for good grass; songs were written to commemorate the potency of his product.) As a grateful initiate into the subculture of jive, where words assume the arcane form of Masonic rites, Mezzrow exemplifies the curious relationship between racism and racial romance. For him, black life is natural and free — a pool of innate authenticity unpolluted by the white man's neurotic self-consciousness. Writing about hipster slang as "alive with a deep-felt poetic sense and rich imagery born out of Nature, jammed with the profound wisdom of the streets," he might be reciting hip-hop's party line.

Really the Blues is an entertaining book (the images of Mezzrow's buddy Louis Armstrong as a beloved, almost supernatural figure are indelible), and it hasn't dated as much as you'd expect: Mezzrow's underground has just gotten commercialized on a mass scale. The paradoxes of race and identity Mezzrow lived out are both intensified and diffused in contemporary rap, where Vanilla Ice and Ice Cube alike construct masks from white fears and vanities. The myth of "the profound wisdom of the streets" stands in for autonomous culture, as black reality disappears behind white shadows.

The strongest pieces in *Rock Folk*, Michael Lydon's 1971 collection of musical profiles, touch on the hunger for autonomous culture in the '60s, and that hunger's displacing consequences. There are lots of hip platitudes in Lydon's writing, but at its core is a real appreciation of how black music underwrote the counterculture — the blues as a wellspring of liberty from which every expressive sound and gesture flowed. The tension in Lydon's book is between rock's instinctive revival of almost-forgotten democratic ideals (taking equality and the pursuit of happiness for inalienable rights, not dispensations of a god-like, capricious state) and the undemocratic constraints blacks were subjected to — the blues as proof of liberty's evanescence.

There's a dignified, weary B.B. King being hectored by young black militants, then quietly explaining to them that justice is the moral imperative suffering teaches. There's Janis Joplin, breaking through one set of barriers ("Her almost inhuman devotion to the exploration of

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